

By MILDRED MIKKANEN

Robert W. Frasch has a historical whodunnit he needs help in solving.

Who made the first cobblestone house?

The identity of that mysterious mason who introduced that uniquely Upstate New York construction method has confounded Frasch and other historians for years.

Frasch has even gone to England in search of the answer.

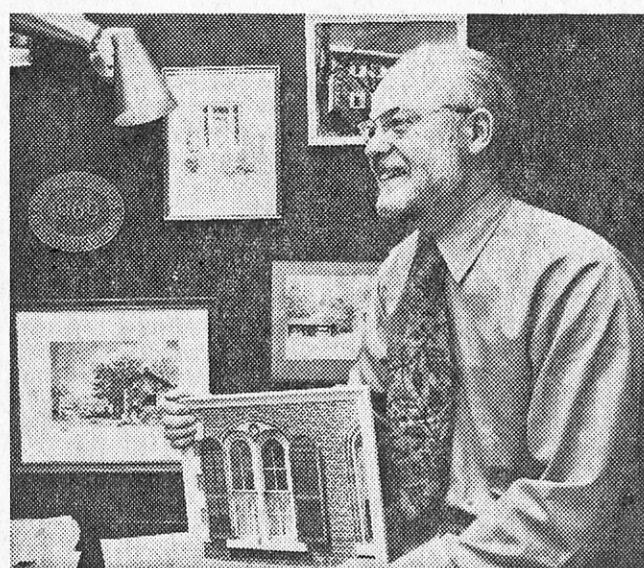
Even though he has a pretty good theory, the proof eludes him.

FRASCH'S "EDUCATED GUESS is that cobblestone construction came from England."

It started here between 1820 and 1830, but similar wall construction had been done as early as 1754 with beach flintstones in England's seaside areas of Brighton, Suffolk, Norfolk and Sussex.

"If we could find the name of an English mason who came to this area in the 1820s, we could almost be sure he introduced cobblestone construction," said Frasch, who is head of audience service at Rochester Museum and Science Center.

IT WOULD HELP IF THAT mason's name could be discovered pronto because Frasch and three colleagues from the Cobblestone Society are rac-



—Times-Union Photo—G. Paul Burnett

Pictures of cobblestone buildings on Robert W. Frasch's study wall are among the many that he and three colleagues in Cobblestone Society have written about in book on that Upstate New York construction.

ing to meet an April deadline for their book, "Cobblestone Masonry Buildings of Upstate New York."

The book will be a 200-page paperback with black and white photographs of the finest examples of the stone construction. "It's aimed at the general public, not just specialists," Frasch said.

Research for the volume has been done on a \$5,000 grant from the New York State Council of the Arts. The book will be part of a council series on state architecture worth saving.

FRASCH CALLED the four years of research and writing "a labor of love" for him and Cary Lattin, Orleans County historian; Oalf William Shलगren Jr., of Buffalo, an architect and architectural historian, and photographer Gerda Peterich of Concord, N.H. Miss Peterich, a professor of art history and photography, taught at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House Inc. in the 1950s.

"The backbone of the book is material we've amassed during the 11 years the Cob-

blestone Society has been in existence," explained Frasch who was one of its founders and first president.

"Someone had to do it" was the way he modestly disclaimed any credit for tracking down and documenting hundreds of cobblestone buildings. Each has a special folder in the den files of his apartment on Calumet Street. He also has a collection of slides he uses for talks on the subject.

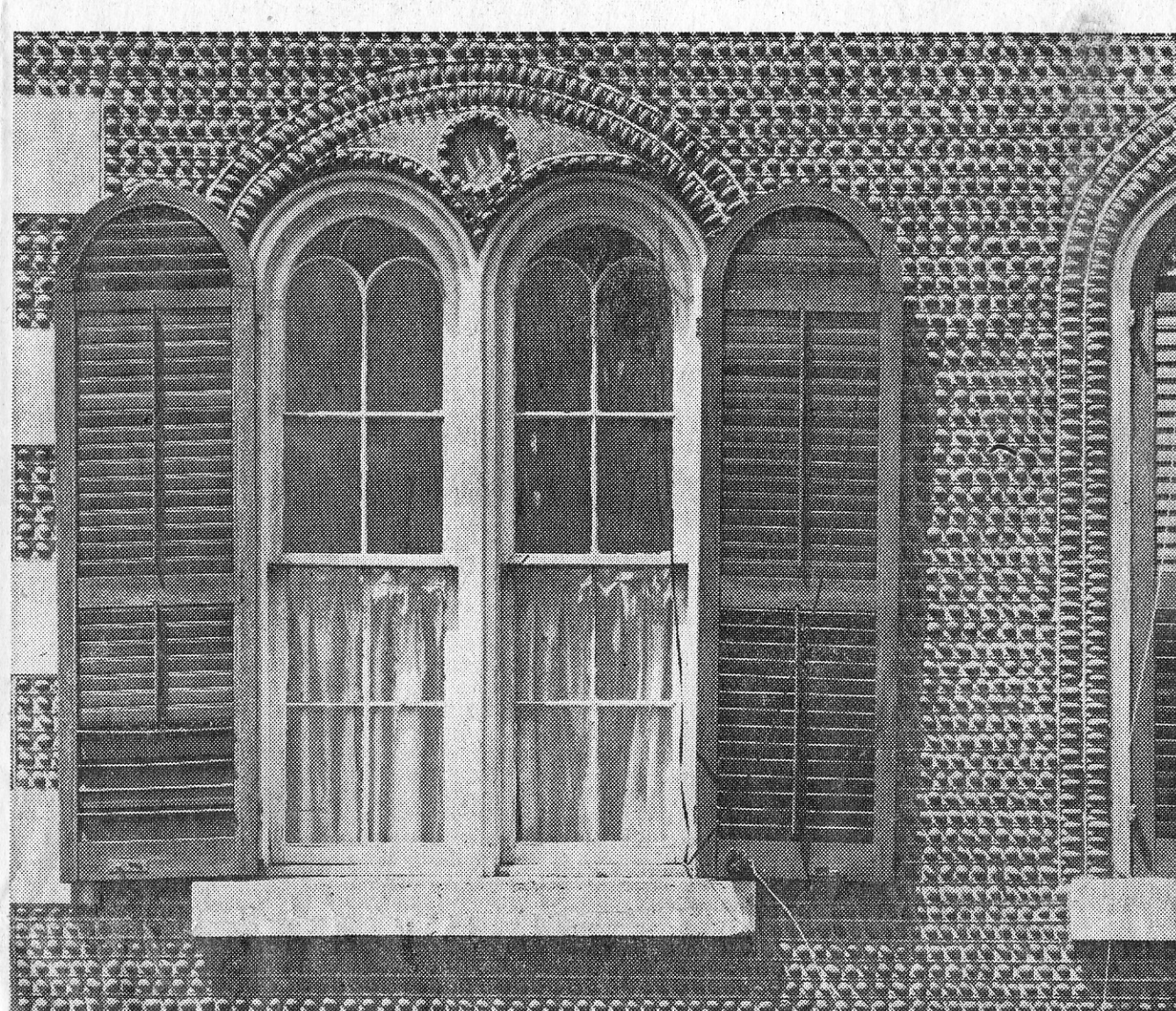
FRASCH, A SOFT-SPOKEN, gray-bearded bachelor, is a Rochester native and has education and science degrees from the State University College at Brockport and the University of Rochester. Architectural history is his hobby.

Cobblestone construction caught his attention when he noticed, as he commuted along Route 104 to his teaching job in Holley, a cobblestone house going to ruin. His desire to save similar buildings prompted organization of the Cobblestone Society.

Two summers ago Frasch spent a month in England searching for information. He has done a chapter in the book on the English flintstone masonry.

COBBLESTONES, PALM SIZED rocks, were tumbled round by the mile-high glacier that deposited them along the

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Gerda Peterich's photograph showing the fine detail of all-one-size cobblestones in the Rippey-Banfield

House south of Geneva will appear in the book on cobblestone buildings.

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Cobblestones...

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Great Lakes plains when it melted.

"New England has cobblestones, too," Frasch said, "but farmers used them for fences, not buildings."

About 90 per cent of all cobblestone buildings are in New York State, Frasch said, Wayne County has 160 buildings, and there are 100 each in Monroe, Ontario and Orleans Counties. Pockets of them are as far east as Vermont, which has four, and as far west as Beloit, Wisc. A few are in Ontario, Canada. All were constructed by migrating upstate masons. "It was a rural develop-

ment and you'll find them on the outskirts of Rochester, not in the city," Frasch continued.

I suppose cobblestone buildings began when people wanted something better than log cabins. The Erie Canal brought them prosperity, and they wanted to show off their wealth and to build homes to last generations."

THE STONES WERE at hand and so were the masons, who had come to build the canal. When it was finished in 1825, they found ready employment.

Not all cobblestone buildings are houses. There are churches and schools, smoke-

houses like those around Mendon, a pigsty in Seneca County, burial vaults near Syracuse, a blacksmith shop in Alloway, even a railroad pumphouse with a two-story

tower in Fishers.

"Children collected the stones for 5 cents a bushel, and they'd sort them by dropping them through holes on a plank or through a ring," Frasch continued. "The small sized stones and the finer ones went on the front walls, the leftovers on the back walls. Oxcarts hauled them from Ontario's shores to places like Geneva."

He said a fine example of a house with perfectly matched lakeshore stones is the Rippey - Banfield House, an Italian villa style home built in 1854 on Route 245 southwest of Geneva. Frasch's favorite house is the Capt. Throop House in Pultneyville "because of its setting across the road from the lake where the stones were gathered."

"The charm of the buildings

is that no two were alike. Each was custom built by one mason to the owners' specifications. Everything was local material from the crushed limestone for the mortar to the wood for the beams and pegged floor boards. The cobblestones were set in wonder-

ful patterns like rows, heringbones and hexagons.

"They stopped building them in the 1850s because people couldn't afford a hand-made house. By then industry was turning out lum-

ber and brick in standardized forms."

Frasch has his own "cobblestone" wall. It's the brown plaster wall in his den that's hung with pictures of cobblestone buildings such as a

sketch of the Quaker Hill Meeting House in Genesee County and a Patricia Wygant water color of the 1849 schoolhouse in Childs that is the Cobblestone Society's museum.